

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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## On Dining: Bellevue's restaurant scene is really beginning to sizzle

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

I'm never going to Seattle again. There are enough restaurants here now. This is the place to be," Rob Angel, creator of Pictionary, told BellevueReporter.com at the recent premiere party for *Pearl*.

Indeed, Bellevue is blowing up big on the restaurant front.

Eric Banh's *Monsoon East* (10245 Main St.) opened this week, joining other new venues -- many with deep roots in Seattle.

In the past few months, *Pearl* debuted in Lincoln Square (700 Bellevue Way N.E., Suite 50), serving contemporary American cuisine in a clubby setting, and *Top Pot* (10600 N.E. Ninth Place) is doing its artisan doughnuts on the Eastside. *Boom Noodle* and *Blue C Sushi* are coming soon, as is the second location of *Barrio*, the Capitol Hill restaurant that opened last week (from the owners of Purple Cafe and Wine Bar).

*El Gaucho* also launched its latest luxe steakhouse recently at 555 110th Ave. N.E., at the new City Center Plaza. It's the fourth location of the venerable beef-fueled venture.

The action is centered on the rapidly changing landscape of downtown Bellevue. On Main Street, *Monsoon East*'s swank look is classic East-meets-West fusion. Design highlights include a vintage hand-carved room divider from China and a bar made from Northwest elm, gently illuminated by lanterns. The place is really a very personal expression of what we love," Banh said of his collaboration with his partner and sister, Sophie.

That expression of love carries over to the menu, too. It is largely lifted from the greatest hits list of the original *Monsoon*, which is staying put for at least the next two years, spared the developer's wrecking ball. A bright spot in the economic gloom.

Additions to the new location include a raw bar, which will feature all sorts of sashimi and a lobster carpaccio, which Banh fell in love with after trying it at a restaurant in his adopted hometown of Edmonton, Alberta. A classic clay pot preparation of pork belly and shrimp will join the lineup, as well as a seafood noodle dish Banh calls a Vietnamese bouillabaisse.

Monsoon East will showcase a lineup of signature cocktails created by Perryn Wright, who has a huge following at Copper Gate in Ballard.

At Pearl, chef Bradley Dickinson has put together a lineup that touts its local roots: "We support local farmers and use organic and sustainable ingredients when available." Good to see Willie Green's getting credit on the opening menu. (That Monroe organic farm is becoming almost as famous as Full Circle, huh? Did you know Willie Green's is owned and operated by classically trained chef-turned-farmer, Jeff Miller?)

The Willie Green's arugula salad at Pearl deepens its local connections with Salumi's sopressata and Chukar Cherries.

Highlights from Pearl's main plates: Bering Sea sablefish with Dungeness crab dumplings, Kurobuta pork braised in juniper berries and served alongside a warm potato salad, pan-roasted free-range chicken and shoestring potatoes.

The restaurant's extensive wine list has a global accent, though fans of Northwest producers will find many options, including some exclusive, high-end stuff such as Leonetti Cellars. Pearl is open daily for lunch and dinner.

El Gaucho also is serving lunch at its new Bellevue location, offering flatbreads, sandwiches (including a \$12 sirloin burger) and a lineup of the aged steaks that have made the place famous. (My favorite on the dinner menu is the ostrich, which tastes like - no, not chicken -- steak, except it's much leaner.)

I'm looking forward to getting in and trying all these new spots. How about you?

## **Pinch some tail**

*Crawfish King* is opening soon in the International District, at the defunct Made in Kitchen, 725 S. Lane St. This Cajun staple is most famous for the hands-on method of eating it. There's no dainty way to tackle a steaming pile of crustaceans that look like miniature lobsters. Nope, when it comes to consuming "mudbugs" you have to pinch some tail and suck some head.

That sounds nasty, but it's as common as slurping oysters from the half shell or crunching on a round of deep-fried shrimp heads at a sushi restaurant. There's even a song written about it.

Here's hoping there will be how-to demos when the King finally comes to town. One thing I do know for sure: Don't wear anything you have to dry clean when dining on crawfish.

## **Deal of the week**

I went to *South Lake Grill* (1253 Thomas St., near REI) last Wednesday to support the restaurant's fund-raising efforts for the University District Food Bank (a portion of the evening's bottom line was donated).

The server said many of my fellow diners were grumpy when they learned the weekly \$5 steak special wasn't offered that evening. People! Come on.

In addition to that unbelievable deal served between 6 and 8 every Wednesday (except last Wednesday), South Lake Grill also offers a half-pound "Blue Collar Burger" with a tall PBR each Thursday for \$9; \$4 margaritas each Monday; and half-off the food tab on Sundays. Those bargains are tough to beat, but I'll be looking to feature recession-busting deals in future columns. If you have suggestions, please share the wealth in the online Soundoff or drop me an e-mail.

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